

Pilgrimage Through the Watchtower

Chapter 2:

What Jehovah's Witnesses Believe



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Chapter 2: What Jehovah's Witnesses Believe

Before getting into the doctrinal teachings of Jehovah's Witnesses, I think I should say something first about Watchtower hermeneutics, study methods and Bible translations.

Watchtower Hermeneutics

Asking a Jehovah's Witness about Biblical hermeneutics is almost guaranteed to draw a blank from the Witness. "Hermeneutics" (the science of Biblical interpretation) is a foreign word to most Witnesses. Because the Watchtower Society is "God's Organization," they reason, all Bible interpretation that it supplies is therefore correct, being directed by God Himself. They therefore see no need for their own personal understanding of hermeneutics.

When one begins to explore Watchtower theology from an objective (non-Witness) viewpoint, he quickly discovers that the established, consistent rules of Biblical hermeneutics have been discarded by the Society in favor of "rules" that enable Watchtower expositors to force Scripture verses to fit the current Watchtower mold. This can be seen in both the Watchtower's re-formulation of basic Christian doctrine as well as in its interpretation of prophecy. With doctrine, the Witness expositors recognize that "on the surface" many Bible verses clearly contradict the teachings of the Society. These verses are therefore "spiritualized" and often interpreted to mean precisely the opposite of what they actually say! With prophecy, this "spiritualized" method enables Watchtower theologians to wrest the application of Biblical prophecies from the people to whom they were originally given (the nation Israel, for example) in order to apply them to "Jehovah's modern-day organization."

Frequent use of this allegorical or "spiritualized" method of interpretation also creates another convenient situation for the Society. If much of Scripture is to be applied "spiritually," or "symbolically," then how are we to know how to interpret the Bible at all? How are we to know which passages are to be understood "spiritually" and which are to be taken literally?

Hence arises the need for a special class of Bible interpreters, the "faithful and discreet slave class." The average Witness himself is very careful not to accept the Bible's teachings at face value. He will instead look to the "slave class" to provide all necessary interpretation for him.

We will consider a much more consistent and satisfactory method of Biblical interpretation, the grammatico-historical method, in chapter six.

Study Methods

The Watchtower has only one recognized Bible study method. Actually, it's probably stretching things to call it a Bible study method at all. It would be more accurate to call it "book study," "indoctrination," or even "brainwashing." Whether it's the Watchtower study on Sunday morning, the book study on Tuesday evening, or a "Bible study" with an interested person in his home, the study method is always the same. Here's how it works:

A "reader" reads aloud a paragraph or two from the Watchtower publication being studied. The "study conductor" reads the corresponding question that's printed at the bottom of the page. The student(s) then answer the question, usually by reading what they have underlined in their own copies of the study material. Scripture texts are looked up and read to confirm the answers given in the paragraph. This procedure is followed paragraph by paragraph until the entire Watchtower article or the chapter in the book is covered. Some individual comments are encouraged, but no deviation from the basic "study" method is allowed. This process is repeated article by article, day after day, week after week, year after year. The Society's viewpoints, via the Watchtower's voluminous study material, is rehashed over and over again. As a result every Jehovah's Witness, regardless of his educational background, is able to parrot the Society's views on virtually any subject. Independent analytical thinking is eventually discarded altogether, and the Witness "discipleship" is then complete. He has completely "made his mind over."

I often wondered why we used these methods in our studies. "If this is the Truth," I wondered, "why virtually brainwash ourselves like this? Why not have open discussions and challenge one another in our studies? Why repeat the same presentations, the same studies on the same topics over and over again?" I reasoned that since most Jehovah's Witnesses were not very well educated, this must be the only way that they could learn. Besides, which was more important, the Truth or the manner in which the Truth was presented? God

had simply given us our "food at the proper time" in such a way that all of His people could easily digest it.

Especially at the beginning, I had a lot of questions, and I usually asked them at the meetings. I was very careful how I worded my questions, however, being careful not to appear as one who might be critical of the organization. Honest questions from a new prospect like me were tolerated somewhat, as long as they didn't disrupt the flow of the meeting. But as I was to find out soon enough, questioning by a dedicated, baptized Witness, even on the smallest point of doctrine, would not be tolerated in the least and could very likely be grounds for disfellowshipping!

Individual Bible study groups not sanctioned by Watchtower headquarters in Brooklyn are strictly forbidden amongst Jehovah's Witnesses. I was to find this out first hand. We had a group of young people in Manitou Springs who got together to study the Watchtower and to encourage one another every Monday evening. After our group had been meeting for several weeks, the elders of our congregation, after discussing the situation with our circuit overseer¹ [see endnote], disbanded it. We were told that our get-togethers were outside of Watchtower Society regulations. And this, even though we were only studying the Watchtower! Independent study and discussion of the Bible without "mother's" direct supervision is strictly forbidden amongst Jehovah's Witnesses.

Bible Translations

Jehovah's Witnesses rarely use any Bible translation other than their own "New World Translation." All other translations are viewed with suspicion, being the products of supposedly "biased" Trinitarian scholars. It is felt amongst the Witnesses that since the standard, reputable translations were produced by scholars who believed in the Trinity, their translations were therefore "slanted" or mistranslated to support their own views of the Godhead. The same "slanting" was supposedly used by these translators to uphold all other historic Christian doctrines as well, including the nature of the soul, the nature of hell, etc. The standard translations, therefore, are not trusted by Jehovah's Witnesses. Isolated texts, however, are sometimes quoted from translations other than the NWT if they seem to support Witness viewpoints. Psalm 83:18, for example is often quoted from the King James version since the tetragrammaton (Heb. YHWH, usually translated "LORD" or "Jehovah") is there translated "Jehovah." Witnesses often use this verse to show their prospective converts God's Name in their own Bibles.

In contrast with the "Trinitarian" translations, the Watchtower Society hails its own New World Translation as the most unbiased and accurate translation available today.² The "New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures," produced by the New World Translation Committee, first appeared in 1950. The "New World Translation of the Hebrew-Aramaic Scriptures" was soon thereafter released in five volumes, the first volume being completed in 1953 and the final volume in 1960. Today the complete New World Translation is published in one volume.

The members of the New World Translation Committee, all of whom were Jehovah's Witnesses, have remained anonymous. They have supposedly assumed this position out of humility, preferring that all credit for the translation go to God alone. Conveniently, though, the anonymity of the Committee members has made any investigation into their scholastic credentials virtually impossible. However, insights into the identities and qualifications of the members of the NWT Translation committee have been offered by a former member of the Brooklyn headquarters staff.³

We'll reserve a technical discussion of the New World Translation for chapter six.

DOCTRINES OF JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES

Just what do Jehovah's Witnesses believe? The following is a brief overview of their teachings:

God

Jehovah is the only true God.⁴ Jesus is "a" god, a "mighty" god, but not Almighty God.⁵ Holy spirit is God's "active force," and is devoid of personality.⁶ There is no plurality in the Godhead.⁷ The doctrine of the Trinity is of pagan origin.⁸

Jehovah God, the Father, first created Jesus, then all other things were created through Jesus.⁹ It is not proper to pray to Jesus.¹⁰ Prayer is to be directed to the Father alone, *through* Jesus.¹¹ It is not proper to worship Jesus.¹² Worship belongs to the Father alone.¹³

Man

The composition of man can be summed up by the formula

"body + spirit = soul."14 It is incorrect to say that man *has* a soul; rather, man *is* a soul.15 There is no soul that lives on after the death of the body.16 Man's spirit also has no existence apart from the body.17 At death the spirit dissipates.18 There is no conscious afterlife.19 God retains only the memory of the one who has died.20

Jesus was not raised with a physical body.21 Likewise, the bodies of Christians with the "heavenly hope" will not be resurrected.22 They, like Jesus, will be re-created as spirits.23

Hell, as the term is commonly understood, does not exist.24 It is impossible for one to experience either blessing or torment in Hades.25 Those cast into gehenna or the lake of fire go off into eternal nonexistence.26

God's People

The nation Israel was at one time God's chosen people, but was cast off forever in 70 C.E.27 Unfulfilled prophecy given to natural Israel is to have fulfillment in "spiritual Israel," the Christian congregation.28 Jehovah's kingdom program does not include the restoration of natural Israel.29

The "little flock" of Luke 12:32 is equated with the 144,000 of Revelation chapters 7 and 14.30 The 144,000 are sealed from among all nations to become "spiritual Israel."31 The sealing of the 144,000 began at Pentecost, 33 C.E., and continues to the present day.32 The 144,000 are sealed to be kings, priests, and the bride of Christ.33 Only these 144,000 Christians will go to heaven to be with Christ.34

The "faithful and discreet slave" of Matthew 24:45 represents the "anointed remnant" of Jehovah's Witnesses which has been responsible for overseeing the kingdom-preaching work in modern times.35 The "faithful and discreet slave class" was identified and rewarded shortly after Christ's invisible return in the year 1914.36 The "slave class" is now in charge of all of Christ's earthly belongings.37 Acquiring the "accurate knowledge" dispensed by this "slave class" is essential to a Christian's salvation.38 In order to receive divine approval on his life, a Christian must willingly submit to all the teachings of the "slave class."39

The "other sheep" of John 10:16 are equated with the "great crowd" of Revelation 7:9.40 This group presently comprises 99.7% of Jehovah's Witnesses.41 Members of the "great crowd" are not to be born again.42 They will pass through the imminent great tribulation and will enter directly into everlasting life on earth.43

The so-called Christian church, or Christendom, is identified with the harlot, "Babylon the Great" of Revelation chapters 17 and 18.⁴⁴ She is hopelessly apostate and will soon be completely destroyed by Jehovah.⁴⁵ In these last days God is dealing exclusively with the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society and with those who are responding favorably to its teachings.⁴⁶ One can only come to understand the Bible and God's purposes by associating with this earthly organization.⁴⁷ One's salvation is dependent upon his favorable response to the teachings of this organization.⁴⁸

Salvation

The gospel to be preached now is primarily the good news that the kingdom of God was invisibly established in the year 1914.⁴⁹ By believing in Christ and by taking refuge in Jehovah's organization, men can now hope to survive the great tribulation and enter directly into the earthly realm of the kingdom.⁵⁰ This "gospel" is in complete harmony with that preached by Paul and the other early disciples.⁵¹

To be "born again" means to be begotten by holy spirit so as to have hope of a heavenly resurrection.⁵² Only 144,000 Christians are to be born again, of whom approximately 9,000 are presently alive on earth.⁵³ The other 3,000,000+ present-day Jehovah's Witnesses have an "earthly hope" and have no need of being born again.⁵⁴

It is improper for a Christian to say that he "is saved."⁵⁵ He has no assurance of salvation.⁵⁶ He awaits future salvation.⁵⁷

To be saved a person must take in knowledge⁵⁸, believe in Jesus Christ⁵⁹, repent⁶⁰, dedicate himself to Jehovah⁶¹, turn around⁶², recognize the Watchtower Society as "God's organization"⁶³, conduct his life in harmony with the teachings and activities of the Watchtower Society⁶⁴, maintain integrity to Jehovah and to his earthly organization⁶⁵, and endure faithfully to the end⁶⁶. The redemptive work of Christ alone is not sufficient for the justification of a believer.⁶⁷

A Christian must not come directly to Jesus for salvation, but only to the Father (Jehovah) *through* Jesus.⁶⁸ Only the members of the 144,000 are under the new covenant by virtue of Christ's blood and may rightly partake of the bread and wine at the Memorial (Communion).⁶⁹ The "other sheep" are to be merely observers at the Memorial.⁷⁰

The Last Days

The duration of the "Gentile Times" can be ascertained to be 2,520 years by a study of Daniel chapter 4.⁷¹ They began in 607 B.C.E with the onset of Israel's Babylonian captivity and ended in the fall of 1914 C.E. with the invisible return of Christ.⁷² The signs of Christ's return began after his return in 1914 and give evidence that he is now invisibly present.⁷³ Christ will not have a visible return to earth.⁷⁴

The "rapture" occurred invisibly in the year 1918.⁷⁵ The bodily translation of the Christian church is a false hope and will not occur.⁷⁶

Christ will not be physically present on earth during the millennium.⁷⁷ The 144,000 of Revelation chapters 7 and 14 will rule invisibly with Christ during the millennium.⁷⁸ The "great crowd" of Revelation chapter 7 will live through the great tribulation and will enter directly into the cleansed earth.⁷⁹ They will inhabit the earth during the millennium.⁸⁰ This "earthly hope" is the Biblical hope for the majority of true Christians alive today.⁸¹

The present heaven and the present earth will be cleansed and will remain forever.⁸² A new heaven and earth will not be created.⁸³

Summary

As can be seen from this brief synopsis of Watchtower doctrine, the primary thrust of Jehovah's Witnesses' teachings and evangelistic efforts is to discredit and if possible, to completely destroy the age-old tenets of historic Christianity. The foundational doctrines of historic Christianity, including the deity and bodily resurrection of Christ, the personality of the Holy Spirit, the triune nature of God, salvation by grace, the rapture of the Church and the visible return of Christ are all vehemently denied by Jehovah's Witnesses. Are the individual Witnesses themselves perhaps ignorant of this fact? By no means! Rather, they rejoice in it! How wonderful to be members of "God's organization," so boldly tearing down Christendom's hoary "doctrines of demons" and replacing them with "the truth of God's word"! Indeed, how wonderful to be Jehovah's instruments in executing such a lofty, divine purpose!

To accomplish this "divine purpose," the Watchtower Society has developed an intensive program of indoctrination and ministerial preparation for its members, as well as a massive

evangelistic campaign to bring its "life saving" message to the ends of the earth. How this program is carried out, the nuts and bolts of it, is the subject of our next chapter.

Endnotes:

1. The circuit overseer is a traveling representative of the Watchtower Society who visits each of the congregations in his "circuit" every four months or so. One of his primary functions is to ensure that each of the congregations is following the organizational policies laid down by the headquarters staff in Brooklyn.
2. Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 277
3. Former "Bethel family" member Bill Cetnar writes in his book, Questions for Jehovah's Witnesses, "From my observation, N.H. Knorr, born 4/23/1905, baptized 1922, Cedar Point OH, and died 6/5/1977 age 72; F.W. Franz, 4th President born 1893, Albert D. Schroeder, G.D. Gangas, and M. Henschel met together in these translation sessions. Aside from vice-president Franz (and his training was limited), none of the committee members had adequate schooling or background to function as critical Bible translators. Franz's ability to do a scholarly job of translating Hebrew is open to serious question since he never formally studied Hebrew. This came out in the Scottish Court of Sessions in November, 1954.
4. Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 150
5. Reasoning from the Scriptures, pp. 136-137, 282-283; Aid to Bible Understanding, p. 919
6. Reasoning from the Scriptures, pp. 136-137; Make Sure of All Things, p. 487
7. Ibid.
8. Reasoning from the Scriptures, pp. 424,425; Watchtower, 9/1/68, p. 583
9. Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 209, pp. 282-283
10. Aid to Bible Understanding, p. 1329
11. Ibid.
12. Reasoning from the Scriptures, pp. 282-283
13. Aid to Bible Understanding, p. 1329

14. Aid to Bible Understanding, p. 1533
15. Reasoning from the Scriptures, pp. 101, 375
16. Ibid., pp. 136-137, 382
17. Ibid., p. 383
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid., p. 382
20. Ibid., p. 333
21. Ibid., p. 334
22. Ibid., p. 333
23. Ibid.
24. Make Sure of All Things, pp. 229-242
25. Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 103; Make Sure of All Things, p. 231
26. Make Sure of All Things, p. 146
27. Watchtower, 11/1/68, p. 649
28. Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 225
29. Ibid., p. 224
30. Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 268
31. Aid to Bible Understanding, p. 683
32. Life Everlasting in Freedom of the Sons of God, p. 161; Our Incoming World Government-God's Kingdom, p. 120
33. Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 137; Make Sure of All Things, p. 303
34. Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 166
35. Watchtower, 1/15/69, p. 51
36. Life Everlasting in Freedom of the Sons of God, pp. 185, 186
37. Ibid.
38. Watchtower, 6/15/68, p. 359

39. Watchtower, 10/1/67
40. Life Everlasting in Freedom of the Sons of God, p. 364
41. Watchtower, 1/1/86, p. 23
42. Watchtower, 12/1/68, pp. 733-735
43. Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 356
44. Ibid., p. 52
45. Ibid., p. 53
46. Watchtower, 8/15/34, p. 249
47. Watchtower, 9/1/54, p. 529; Watchtower, 10/1/67, p. 587; Watchtower, 12/1/81, p. 27
48. Watchtower, 11/15/81, p. 21
49. Watchtower 5/1/81, p. 17
50. The Truth that Leads to Eternal Life, pp. 23, 121
51. Watchtower, 11/1/68, pp. 652-656
52. Watchtower, 12/1/68, pp. 733-735
53. Watchtower, 2/15/86, pp. 12-14
54. Ibid., pp. 14, 20
55. Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 360
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid., p. 358
58. Watchtower 6/15/68, p. 359
59. Watchtower 12/1/85, p. 9
60. Aid to Bible Understanding, p. 1386
61. The Truth that Leads to Eternal Life, p. 182
62. Aid to Bible Understanding, p. 1388
63. Watchtower 6/15/68, p. 359
64. Ibid.
65. Watchtower 12/1/85, p. 18

66.Ibid.

67.Ibid., p. 7

68.Aid to Bible Understanding, p. 1329

69.Reasoning from the Scriptures, pp. 268, 324-325;
Watchtower, 2/15/86, p. 15

70.Ibid.

71.Reasoning from the Scriptures, pp. 95-97

72.Ibid.

73.Watchtower, 2/16/85, p. 16

74.Reasoning from the Scriptures, pp. 314, 343; Make Sure of
All Things, p. 451

75.Babylon the Great has Fallen, p. 458

76.Ibid.

77.Aid to Bible Understanding, pp. 551, 1336

78.Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 137

79.Watchtower, 12/1/85, p. 17

80.Ibid., pp. 17-18

81.Ibid.

82.Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 436; Make Sure of All
Things, p. 166

83.Ibid.

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